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**An Analysis of the Grammatical Errors of Igbo-Speaking
Graduates' Written English: Implications for Teaching**

Nwigwe, N. V., Ph.D.

Department of English Language and Literature
Alvan Ikoju Federal College of Education
E-mail: nwigwengoziv@yahoo.com

Izuagba, A. C., Ph.D.

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Alvan Ikoju Federal College of Education
PMB 103, Owerri
Imo State, Nigeria
Phone Number: +2348037159884
E-mail: drangelazuchi@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The study sought to determine errors made by students undergoing the Professional Diploma in Education programme in the institution. This study stemmed from the fact that the current dominant medium of accessing knowledge globally is the English language. Unfortunately, the reality in Nigeria is that students' performance in English is very poor, in spite of its being the country's official language and the most regularly taught subject in the curriculum. Presently, the linguistic situation in Nigeria is that

many graduates leave the universities without the requisite communicative skills in both the indigenous language (L_1) and the English Language (L_2). In this study, document analysis was done to detect the grammatical errors in these students' written essays in English. The errors were further classified based on their types and sources and analysed using simple percentages. The results of the analysis showed that the dominant errors were in the areas of spelling, tense, concord, use of prepositions, punctuation, and plural and singular forms. Based on these findings, recommendations were made and they include the restructuring of the English language teacher, education curriculum to integrate contrastive analysis and error analysis as well as the use of interactive strategies in teaching to enhance practice.

Key words: Analysis, Grammatical errors, Igbo speaking graduates, Written English

Introduction

Language is an indispensable means of communication and a veritable tool of socio-economic mobility in every society where English is the official language. In Nigeria, the multiplicity of indigenous languages and politics have given English, though a foreign language, a position of importance as an official second language and the primary language of education, commerce and officialdom. In addition, the fact that English is the language of widest communication in the 21st century global village is an added advantage for competent users of English. There is no doubt that the dominant medium of accessing knowledge globally is the English language. In view of the position and functions of English globally, it is imperative that users of English as a second or foreign language must develop their proficiency in the language in order to compete favourably in the global knowledge-driven labour market. The education system has an important role to play in this regard. Unfortunately, the reality in Nigeria is that students' performance in English Language is very poor, in spite of its being the widest used language and the most regularly taught subject in the curriculum. It is also the worst spoken, learnt and taught in the curriculum (Emenanjo, 2002). It is therefore not unusual that many students in Nigeria complete secondary school education and still lack the required communicative skills and competencies in the English Language, to function in the labour market (Obanya 2007). The situation has further deteriorated to the point that currently, even many university graduates lack competence in both spoken and written English Language in spite of the fact that English is a compulsory subject throughout primary and secondary school and a medium of classroom instruction from senior primary school to the tertiary, except in a few non-English language courses. However, it must be recognized that in spite of the position accorded to English as the language of officialdom and other significant functions in Nigeria, it is still a second language (L_2). This implies that most Nigerians acquire an (L_1) before the formal exposure to English. The result is that there is noticeable language interference in the use of English by most Nigerians and this generates inter-lingual errors. The sad truth about the linguistic situation in Nigeria is that many graduates of

Nigerian universities lack the requisite competence and communicative skills and in both their indigenous language (L1) and the English Language (L2). This paper is however limited to a study of the grammatical errors in the written work of Igbo-speaking graduates in a post-graduate diploma programme.

Several researches have been done on the English language performance of secondary school students and undergraduates. Many of the reports have shown that a good proportion of Nigerian students are weak in both their spoken English performance and the writing skills (Uwadie, 2010; Onyeukwu, 2011). The researchers expressed the view that grammatical errors dominate the language use of these students even at a stage it would be expected that they would have overcome the developmental errors and attained linguistic competence. Language at all levels is rule-governed. A poor knowledge of grammatical rules therefore adversely affects communication. It is for this reason that grammar is regarded as the most fundamental element of language learning for second language learners. Although Obanya (2004) held that a lot of emphasis is devoted to the teaching of grammatical rules in Nigeria, Foppoli (2012) insisted that grammar is the foundation of a language. It is however unfortunate that in spite of the emphasis on grammar in language teaching and learning, grammatical errors still abound in the spoken and written English of many educated Nigerians.

There are however divergent opinions on the issue of grammatical errors in language teaching. Many teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) argued that grammatical errors should be pointed out to learners in order to enable them identify the lapses in their application of grammar. On the other hand, some others argue that the concern with grammatical errors is prescriptive. This view is further expounded by those who believed that if a teacher points out the learners' errors, learners become anxious and the errors inhibit learning. Specifically, Gray (2004) stated that error correction had discouraged learners from writing because they tended to have a negative feeling on writing when compared with those whose errors were not corrected. Nevertheless, he still maintained the view that drawing learners' attention to their errors plays a very big role in enhancing their proficiency in the language. Additionally, it is important to note that since language is rule-governed and grammatical rules exist in languages, discussions on grammatical errors cannot be avoided in language teaching and learning.

Language Learning and Errors

Errors are common features of language learning as they highlight the areas of learners' language needs. All learners of a second language commit a number of errors; little wonder Dulay & Burt (1974, p. 1) posited that 'You can't learn without goofing'. This highlights the fact that the process of language learning, like any other process of acquiring a skill, involves learning and making errors until competence is attained. Errors are therefore natural in the language learner; hence it is normally expected that

the learners develop from one level of competence to another. Generally, scholars have identified two main approaches of analysing L₂ learners' errors: contrastive analysis, and error analysis.

Contrastive analysis is the brain child of the theories of the behavioural psychologists and structural linguists on language learning which gained ground in the 1960s. Specifically, the structural linguists believe that L₂ learners' errors are mainly due to L₁ interference. They see errors as inimical and undesirable in second/ foreign language learning. Hence, they insist that errors must be corrected once they occur; otherwise, they become an ingrained language habit; since they believe that language learning is habit formation. They assert that learners of second language tend to transfer forms, meaning and the distribution of their mother tongue to the target language. It thus implies that if the differences between the systems of the second language and the learners' mother tongue are many, the learner will have more learning problems due to interference. Based on this, Lado (1957, p. vii) suggested that the only way to prevent the errors is for the language teacher to carry out a systematic analysis of both languages in order to identify the areas of differences and similarities and make the areas of differences the focus of teaching and learning. Specifically, Lado (1957, p. 2) said:

Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture - both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practised by natives...that the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult.

Unfortunately, some experiments and observations made by researchers revealed serious limitations in this approach of contrastive analysis. Corder (1978) and Mungungu (2010) confirmed that second language (L₂) learners' errors could linguistically be explained when we explore the way in which the learner "has deviated from the realization" of the target language rules. Also, L₂ learners' errors could be explained from a "psycho-linguistic" point of view, when we explore the causes of this deviation from the target language system. Chomsky (1986) was at the forefront as he argued that language learning is not a process of habit-formation but rather a process of hypothesis-formation and testing. In other words, errors are no longer seen as either habits to be eradicated, or inevitable by-products of the conflict resulting from the distinct structures, levels, and rules of two grammars. They are now evidence that underlie the constructive hypothesis of the learner (Basrah, 2013; Ojetunde, 2013). Chomsky also posited that L₂ learners' errors are natural, inevitable and a significant

part of the language learning process and provides important information to the teachers on the learners' areas of target language needs.

From the discussions above, it is clear that errors are natural, inevitable and an evidence of a creative process in language learning through which language learners test their hypotheses. Errors also constitute a critical pedagogical feedback for ESL teachers to improve and reflect on their own deficiencies in knowledge, lesson plans and teaching methods, (Brown, 2007). Selinker (1969) therefore argued that errors made by learners should be of great interest to teachers for the following reasons:

- i. errors enable the teacher to determine the progress the learners have made in language learning;
- ii. errors also enable the teacher to know how a learner processes and utilises the language data he/she has provided.
- iii. errors also expose the strategies the learners adopt in language learning. This gives some insights into the methods/ strategies that are effective with a group of learners and the ones that are not effective in language teaching.
- iv. errors are significant to the language teacher as they help him/her in progressively planning and replanning the language lessons in order to improve learners' language proficiency.
- v. learners' errors enable the language teacher to determine the types and sources in order to plan remedial lessons as well as develop teaching materials that are apt.
- vi. errors also help the teacher to develop apt teaching and learning resources cued to the areas of learners' language needs.
- vii. Most importantly, errors make the teacher to be supportive.

As a matter of fact, a teacher's attitude to learners' errors determines the extent learner's progress through the language curriculum. In doing this, a teacher is expected to be positively disposed towards identifying the errors and classifying them based on their types. In addition, identification of the error sources, planning remedial lessons based on the analysis, and contextualizing their uses in classroom activities, will enable the learners make remarkable progress, (Basrah, 2013, Selinker, 1969). Considering the importance of grammar in language teaching and learning, many researchers have paid close attention to grammatical errors amongst secondary schools' students and undergraduates. Some of the findings are reported in what follows.

Empirical Report on Grammatical Errors

The importance of error analysis in achieving both proficiency and competence in English has generated many research works in the area of grammatical error analysis.

Adogwa (1993) analysed the grammatical and discourse errors of two hundred and sixty-nine (269) SS111 students (10% of the total population) selected from 14 secondary schools in Kaduna State and one hundred and thirty-two (132) 100 level undergraduate students of ABU, Zaria selected from some courses. A stratified random sampling technique was employed in the selection of the samples while essay writing and a questionnaire were used as the data collection instruments. The findings revealed the persistence of three broad categories of grammatical errors namely: the structural, the lexical, and the mechanical. Discourse errors such as poor paragraphing, a poor use of cohesive devices and the repetition of lexical items within a paragraph were also discovered. Both groups of students were found to produce similar grammatical and discourse errors. This shows that the one-year formal English instruction at the 100 Level had not significantly improved their performance. The study also showed that the sources of errors include overgeneralization, faulty teaching, lack of awareness of the working of the English sentence pattern, and the lack of self-editing.

A similar study carried out by Ndjoze-Ojo (1995) was reported by Usuman (2014) on the grammatical and writing errors of 100 Level Pharmacy students of ABU, between 1988 and 1994. The study which did a detailed consideration of the grammatical and mechanical errors of four hundred and sixty-seven (p. 467) written scripts, showed that syntactic and mechanical accuracy errors occurred frequently, whereas redundancy errors and in particular the prepositional type, were the least in frequency. However, it was observed that the study did not state how the sample of four hundred and sixty-seven (467) was arrived at. Similarly, Usuman (2014) reported a study of Nigerian secondary school students' grammatical errors by Tonga (1999) who analysed the essay scripts of students. His findings showed a high frequency of learners' errors in the following areas: error of concord, incorrect use of preposition, pluralizing of uncountable nouns, and misuse of tenses. The study however, revealed the students' lack of understanding of the grammatical rules of English.

At the international scene, similar errors have been identified amongst learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Darus & Subramaniam (2009, p. 495). Using Corder's (1967) model of error analysis, examined errors in a corpus of 72 essays written by Malaysian students, they found that student's errors were of six types, namely: singular/plural form, verb tense, word choice, preposition, subject-verb agreement and word order. Sarfraz (2011) examined the errors made by 50 Pakistani undergraduate students in written essays, and found out the overwhelming majority of errors the students made were inter -language ones and with those resulting from mother tongue interference.

Ridha (2012) examined English language writing samples of 80 EFL college students. The errors were categorized according to the following taxonomy: grammatical, lexical/semantic, mechanics, and word order. The results showed that most of the

students' errors could have been due to L₁ transfer, as she discovered that most learners depended on their mother tongue in expressing their ideas. Furthermore, Usuman (2014) reported another study on error analysis of the written English Essays among Arab learners in a preparatory year program in Saudi Arabia. The result showed that the Arabic speakers in his study committed ten common errors. These are: (1) verb tense (2) word order (3) singular/plural form, (4) subject-verb agreement (5) double negations, (6) spellings, (7) capitalization (8) articles (9) sentence fragments and (10) prepositions. The researcher discovered that the Saudi learners of English commit errors due to L₁ transfer.

The above empirical evidence supports the view that errors are inevitable in language learning. A teacher's ability to identify and use these errors in planning his/her teaching is of utmost importance in order to enhance language learning. This study therefore sets out to determine errors made by graduate students in a Professional Diploma in Education (PDE) programme in order to utilise the errors in planning for teaching. To achieve this, some research questions have been designed to guide the study:

Research Questions

1. What are the grammatical errors committed by ESL learners in writing?
2. What are the sources of the grammatical errors prevalent among the students?

Method

A quasi-experimental design was chosen for this study since there was no control over the independent variables and no treatment given to subjects. The researchers only identified and analysed the predominant grammatical errors in the students' written English. The students comprised of 50 graduates who studied a variety of courses in different Nigerian tertiary institutions. They are currently doing the Professional Diploma in Education programme under the auspices of the Teachers' Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN), housed in the Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri.

The instrument utilized in the study was a written composition of not less than 250 words on 'An Incident They Will Never Forget'. This composition was written within thirty (30) minutes in a classroom situation in a Language and Communication Skills course.

Thus, before the collection of data, the subjects were informed of the purpose of the study which was to investigate a research work, and that the test would not affect their final examination results.

The study limited the errors analysed to six, namely;

- i. Spelling errors

- ii. Wrong use of prepositions
- iii. Wrong tenses
- iv. Wrong use of punctuation marks
- v. Wrong concord
- vi. Wrong plural and singular forms

Data generated were analysed in simple percentages.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the grammatical errors in the Professional Diploma students' written English?

Table 1: Percentage grammatical errors in the Professional Diploma in Education students' written English

S/N	Errors	Frequency	Percentage
1	Wrong Spellings	182	26.7
2	Wrong Tenses	302	44.3
3	Wrong Punctuation	114	16.7
4	Wrong Concord	24	3.5
5	Wrong Singular & Plural forms	30	4.3
6	Wrong Prepositions	31	4.5
Total		682	100

The above table shows that 682 errors were identified in the 50 scripts marked. Out of the 682 errors, 182 or 26.7% were wrong spellings, 302 or 44.3% were cases of wrong tenses, 114 or 16.7% represent wrong punctuation marks, 24 or 3.5% wrong concord, 30 or 4.3% reflected a wrong usage of plural and singular forms, while the use of wrong prepositions constituted 13 errors or 4.5%.

Research Question 2: What are the sources of the grammatical errors prevalent among the students?

Table 2: Examples of Errors in the Professional Diploma in Education students' written English

S/N	Error Type	Source	Examples of Errors	Frequency	%
1.	Spelling	Phonological inter-lingual errors leading to malapropism	*work/walk /wə:k/ /wɔ:k *were/where /wə:/ /weə/ *where/were /weə/ /wə:/ *their/there /ðeə/ / ðeə/ *thought/taught /θɔ:t/ / tɔ:t/ *bare/bear /beə/ / beə/ *faithful/fateful /feɪθfəl/ /feitfəl/ *mist/midst /mist//mist/?***** *birth/bath /bəɪt/ /bɑ:t/ *advise/advice /ədvaɪz/ /ədvaɪs/ *the/they /ði:/ / ðeɪ/ *drawing/drowning/drɔ:nɪŋ/ /draɪnɪŋ/ *had/heard /həd/ /hɜ:d *holl/hall	182	26.7
		Inter-lingual errors due to the absence of consonant clusters in Igbo	*stoped/stopped *acident/accident *rober/robber *colapsed/collapsed *jewelry/jewelry *realy/really *ful/full		
		Wrong application of English consonant clusters.	*inccident/incident *untill/until *comming/coming		
		Inter-lingual errors due to the absence of long vowel sounds in Igbo. In English, the long vowel sound may be represented by a combination of vowel and consonant unlike Igbo that has a CVCV structure and there is a sound-letter relationship.	*riching/reaching /rɪtʃ-ɪŋ/ /rɪtʃ-ɪŋ/ *gun short/gun- shot/gʌn ʃɔ:t/ /gʌn ʃɔt *emback/embark/imbak/ /imba:k/ *packing/parking/pak-ɪŋ/ /pɑ:k-ɪŋ/ *bagen/bargain /bɑg-ɪn /bɑ:ɡɪn		
		Other discrepancies arising from students' phonic perception and actual graphic representations. The /l/ and /r/ sounds are used interchangeably in some dialects of Igbo.	kichen/kitchen *becond/beckoned *cloud/crowd *jorney/journey		
		Wrongly spelt words arising from the silent r in certain word positions unlike Igbo where all the letters in a word are pronounced	*suprise/surprise *seach/search *demacate/demarcate *stated/started *futher/further		

		Possible carelessness in listening which was transferred to graphics.	*attitude/aptitude *zineth/zenith *summite/submit *scriptural/spiritual *villantees/vigilantes		
		Confusion on whether compound words should be written together or as separate words.	*every one/everyone *any one/anyone *all together/ altogether *no where/nowhere *my self/myself *alot/ a lot *infact/ in fact *mis understood/ misunderstood *no body/nobody *dumb founded/dumbfounded *helter skelter/helter-skelter		
2.	Wrong Tenses	Intra-lingual problems arising from the irregularity in the English tense system and over-generalization of the -ed regular tense marker	-Darkness *befalled me -They did not only *took valuables... -They were people who *have gathered... -To me, it was as if I *am...	302	44.3
3.	Wrong Punctuation	- Incomplete knowledge and application of punctuation rules.	- Then all of a sudden* we heard a gun- shot. -In fact*I was between life and death.	114	16.7
4.	Wrong Concord	- Intra-lingual errors from inconsistency in English. -Incomplete knowledge and application of the rules of Concord. -Inability to read properly and apply the punctuation marks in graphics.	- Members of the hostel *was there. -All the addictions* has	24	3.5
5.	Plural & Singular forms	- Intra-lingual problems from irregularities in the plural formation and usage -Incomplete knowledge and application of the singular and plural formation rules.	- many incident, -*smokes started, -*all staffs, - FRSC*headquater, our *luggages	30	4.3
6.	Wrong Preposition	There is only one distinct preposition in Igbo, <u>na</u> , and it is used in all environments. Faulty knowledge of the use of English prepositions.-	*on the second week, *in the list*,engage on,*start on 9a.m.*drive in speed,*everything in our possession,*at initial, the girls* of my church	31	4.5
			TOTAL	682	100%

Discussion

The above table shows that a total of 698 errors were noted in the 50 scripts marked. 302 or 43% were cases of wrong tense, 114 or 16.3% of wrong punctuation, 24 or 3.4% of wrong concord, 30 or 4.2% of plural and singular forms and wrong preposition respectively while 16 or 2.9% were related to wrong morpheme boundaries. From the table above, the analysis showed that the students committed more errors in spelling as reflected in the frequency of its occurrence. Out of the 698 errors, 182 or 26% were from spelling. Generally, the error sources are both inter-lingual and intra-lingual. The differences in the features of Igbo and English are a major source of errors. Also, the irregularities in the English grammatical rules are a major challenge. Finally, the inability of students to master grammatical rules and apply them appropriately is equally a major source of errors.

Implications for the Teaching of English Language

In order to remedy the problem of grammatical errors in English, among graduates of Nigerian tertiary institutions, a fresh approach should be adopted in the training of the teachers who teach English at different levels in the education sector. Considering the nature of the identified errors which include malapropism and inter-lingual errors, all student-teachers should be exposed to the principles of contrastive linguistics while in training. This is important in order to enable them apply the knowledge in the teaching of the English language, right from the primary and secondary levels of education. The principles are predicated on comparative analysis of the systems and structures of the learners L₁ and the English language. This will help the English language teacher to see how the learners' first language deviates from Standard English at the various levels of language description.

The issue of large classes at all levels of education should be addressed so that the English language can be taught functionally. This implies that interactive strategies that engage learners in active language use in the class should be encouraged more than a theoretical knowledge of grammar. At the tertiary level, the Use of English course is often taught in very large and uncontrollable classes. As a result, students are hardly ever serious with the course and many lecturers are discouraged and frustrated. It is therefore not surprising that the communicative competence of undergraduates hardly improves at the end of the course. In addition, since almost all English language teachers in our secondary schools are second language learners of English, a system of continual professional development should be put in place to keep them abreast with current issues in the English language content, and methods of teaching it.

Given the importance of grammatical knowledge and use in effective communication, the use of non-specialists in the teaching of English language in the primary and secondary schools should be avoided in order to equip learners adequately for

communicative tasks in the English language in and outside the school. Furthermore, teachers of the English language should integrate remedial teaching in their scheme of work to ensure that all errors identified are remediated to enhance learning. Finally, the English language teacher educators should teach for mastery and not for the trainees to pass examinations to enable them master the logic and structure of the English language syllabus so as to be able to impact positively on the learners.

Conclusion

The study sought to determine the types and sources of errors made by students undergoing the PDE programme in the institution. The results showed that in spite of years of teaching and learning the English language from the primary school to the university, the language performance of these graduates manifested a high degree of grammatical errors. Many of the errors were spelling errors which stem from inter-lingual or intra-lingual sources. Other errors include the wrong use of tenses, punctuation, and grammatical concord. Based on these, suggestions were made to improve teaching.

Recommendations

Based on the findings the following recommendations were made:

- i. Teacher education curriculum for English language teachers should be reviewed to include the use of interactive/collaborative strategies to facilitate language use by learners.
- ii. The curriculum should include contrastive analysis and error analysis to enable teacher trainees specializing in the English language to have a good grasp of the nature and structure of English language and the child's mother tongue to effectively address their language needs.
- iii. More emphasis should be given to the study of grammar than literary studies to adequately equip the teacher trainees to teach English language effectively

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